



Sermon Christmas 2017



We at the cathedral are nearing the end of an exhibition entitled, 'Seasons of Birth and Creativity', you can see it in the hall next door. It is an exhibition in which the artists reflected on the process of birth and creativity: conception, pregnancy, waiting, growing, birth, naming. The images and sculptures provide rich food for this season.

Here are three very different images from the exhibition, one from Leo Wimmer, an icon of Mary and Jesus, one from Julie Mielke, her daughter and newborn child, and one from Claire Flack, angels singing, and family gathering, celebrating..

All these cause me to ponder on this birth we celebrate tonight/today.. the tenderness, the bond, the love..the meaning.

A mother holding a newborn child..

At home, I have many representations of Mary and her child, Jesus. I have icons, a small wooden sculpture, a picture of a stained glass window at Grace Cathedral depicting the galaxies being birthed.. This mother and child call out something in me..

It's a maternal something, a nurturing protective something which resonates with me.. the birth of a child is a universal symbol of new life.. yet the reality is that in many parts of the world this new life is tenuous, vulnerable, and if a child survives beyond a year it is still a miracle.

The biblical narrative in Luke, makes of this story something more.. in the birth of this particular child, heaven and earth meet.. God experiences something new, and we encounter God in new ways..this birth becomes a symbol and a reality of God with us.. God, not distant and powerful and beyond, but God vulnerable, needy, available, learning.. God .. God born in a borrowed room, then fleeing and seeking refuge from genocide.. This God gets it, and sometimes seems closer to those on the edges than us in our prosperity..

(Recently, at playgroup, I found myself rocking a baby to sleep on my chest.

I rocked back and forwards, back and forwards, as you do when you are rocking a baby, feeling her weight, sensing her breath, hearing the gentle snuffling sound of sleep. She relaxed, resting soundly in my arms.)

According to Luke, 'Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.'

This is not just any life, here is the presence of 'God with us' Emmanuel, flesh and blood symbol of God's unconditional love.. the one who is also sacrifice..

We can let go of fear, for we recognise in this sleeping child, a truth, which is mystery, in a particular baby, a particular time..

We see the baby, swaddled in cloth. We watch him sleep, hear his cries, the lowing of cattle, and the baaing of sheep. We smell the warm hay and know the new born, messy and moist with blood and water, very human.

We touch his cheek, curl his tiny fingers around ours, count his toes.

Then, we stand back in silence, in awe, because God is with us now, as God has always been.

Loader (adapted) broadens the picture:

'There are shepherds and the angels too, which are part of the story and tell us something more of who this Jesus is.

Shepherds were sometimes a despised group. They represent ordinary people, not those given great status or deserving special privilege in the human community. They are poor people. To such as these Jesus came.

The angels' presence is as though there is a veil separating the world of heaven and the earthly world; for a moment the veil is withdrawn. The shepherds on earth are caught up into the activities of heaven. They participate in the heavenly choir of praise. This is a powerful symbol which signals that in Jesus we find ourselves encountered by God.

The vertical and horizontal meet in Jesus. The deep divine secret of life breaks through.. At Christmas, we are addressed by God in

our ordinariness without our deserving, and are drawn into God's activity.'<sup>1</sup>

Poet Joel McKerrow contrasts this first Christmas with now:<sup>2</sup>

'The first Christmas was not like my Christmas. Not like yours. The tinsel and wrapping and presents given. The prawns and the party. The \$8.5 billion, in Australia alone, spent every year on stuff we don't need. The first Christmas was more like the Christmas that the majority of our world still faces today. Harsh. Bloody. Fleeing. Cold.

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O little town of Bethlehem in Palestine, just beyond the wall, where Shepherds watch their flocks by night now guided by a star or winking satellite or drone in flight. This silent night may we remember the people on the other side of the wall, where mangers lay burnt and bombed, where babies never get a chance to grow up to be saviours. In the midst of occupation and resistance and fleeing and seeking asylum and governments built on power and a world built on atrocity, the inequality of position. In the midst of wrapping paper and gift. May we remember. May we prepare. Not just for the meal and the presents. Such preparations for Christmas can be more a sign of our privilege than our love.

Let us instead prepare our hearts. For a saviour birthed bloody and a mother fleeing and a Father broken. This was the first Christmas. This is Christmas for so many. Those who too have no place to lay their heads.

So, let us give gifts that matter. Let us celebrate with each other. Let us hold our families. Let us remember. Let us never let go of the tension between living the meaningful lives we so desire and the reality that too often consumes us. Let us remind ourselves, this Christmas and every one to come, of the real story. The first Christmas.'

William Loader reflects:

'The power of the story is its creativity. It opens itself to us and opens us to ourselves and to our world. It is a rejoicing that invites

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<sup>1</sup> [wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/Christmas7.htm](http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/Christmas7.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fortomorrow.org.au/stories/story/the-first-christmas>

us to joy. And it is a murmuring of pain and crying. It enlarges birth itself and somehow also creates new life in us if we allow the meeting to take place.<sup>3</sup>

As Luke has told it, the scene contrasts powerlessness and deprivation with powerful rulers.  
Here is a new powerless power.  
Here is a new foolish wisdom.  
Here is God.  
Think about that a moment...

Susanna

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<sup>3</sup> [wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/Christmas7.htm](http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/Christmas7.htm)