

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James'

Christmas Day

25th December 2018.

'New Beginnings'

Readings: Isaiah 52: 7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1: 1-4; John 1: 1-14.

In the Beginning

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,
the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,
while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.
Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.
And God saw that the light was good;
and God separated the light from the darkness.
God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.
And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

(Genesis 1: 1-5)

The Bible starts with the story of creation and then proceeds by tracing out an account of the people of God from the earliest times through to the era of Jesus and the early church. In the beginning it is the story of everyone - as Adam and Eve are two characters who represent all of humanity and who reflect the human condition. This condition is the tension between affection and estrangement, between connection and disconnection, between peace and conflict, between sin and righteousness.

The setting is a garden where the man and the woman live in harmony with nature, each other and God. This is God's intention – a world of peace and good-will for all. But the man and the woman break the peaceful relationships that exist and are 'cast out' of the garden. Thus, begins the story of the people of God – a story of all people.

The Old Testament goes on to describe the ebb and flow of God's people in terms of being in and out of a positive relationship with God. Life becomes more complex and structured, yet like Adam and Eve the people continue to rebel and go their own way. Yet, each time the people stray God sends a 'shepherd', (such as a prophet, priest or king), to bring the people back to the good life. The narrative eventually becomes one of God's love for humanity in the face of the tragedy of human existence – be it the brokenness of war, abuse, or the failure to respect one another and the created order.

Begin Again

It is in the light of this background that John's Gospel makes a new beginning – a new spiritual Genesis:

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.
What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

(John 1: 1-5)

The accounts of the birth of Jesus speak of a new creation, by which God seeks to reverse the brokenness created by the rebellion of Adam and Eve. In Jesus, God creates a new presence in the world – not a distant one but instead one that is present in humanity itself. St Paul therefore describes Jesus as the second Adam through whom 'all are made alive'. This suggests that God provides the opportunity of new life for all people. In a similar way, we often describe Jesus as the 'good shepherd' who seeks out and saves the lost. It is therefore God's intention invite all humanity back into the garden.

People ask, 'where is God?' to which there are many answers: God is in creation as described at the beginning of the Bible. Likewise, God is present in the worship performed by his people. God is also present in humanity in the person of Jesus; and so, the message goes on down through the ages even to us today - for God continues to be present through the Holy Spirit operating through us in the world now. The story of God's people therefore continues in our own generation.

It is this that we celebrate at Christmas - the message that God is present in the world seeking to restore us into a living and meaningful relationship with himself and each other. The birth of Jesus is the icon of God's sharing in humanity by being born into the world, that the world might be saved by becoming like him.

This is a message for all people, for it seeks to return us to the peace and good-will that existed at the beginning of creation – before the divisions of race, creed, colour and class.

And Again, and Again, and Again...

Jesus became the paradigm of what it is to be a human being filled with the presence of God. Yet this was a dangerous business, for Jesus was also destined to die. The Spirit of God does not exempt us from the human tragedy of death but rather guides us through it and gives us hope beyond it.

What we see in the Jesus story is a rebirth of God's creative processes in the world that involves all humanity living in a more intimate relationship with God than before. Indeed, it signalled the possibility of a return to the Garden of Eden where God, creation and humanity lived in harmony.

Christmas therefore heralds a new way of looking at the world and our place in it. It inverts what we might consider the 'natural order of things' - such that the rich and powerful should rule and that self-interest should be the guide for social behaviour.

In contrast, the Christian narrative acknowledges God's all-pervading presence in the world that requires us to have a priority for the needs of the poor and marginalised. The story of the Christ is dangerous because it calls us to make a moral judgement about ourselves and the world in which we live, and willingly change our lives by becoming committed to the purposes of God.

We are therefore called to be followers of Jesus first and foremost, and all other allegiances and priorities flow from this; it is about radical change for all of humanity.

The idea that God is present in ordinary people subverts human authority and the hierarchy that goes with it. It calls us to be honest with ourselves and turn to God rather than our own desires. It gives a priority to love others and be concerned for their well-being rather than pursue our own interests. But all of this is an activity that is done in a spirit of humility and vulnerability; a mood that looks very much like that of a newborn baby.