

## Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

**The Reverend Andrew Sempell**

*Rector of St James*

### **Christmas Midnight**

**24<sup>th</sup> December 2020**

**Readings:** Isaiah 9: 2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2: 11-14; Luke 2: 1-14.

#### ***'Living on the Edge'***

#### **Fire and Rain**

I am one who loves to sit in front of a fire; watching the flames leap into the air and the smoke curl up the chimney, feeling the warmth on the face and hands, and the dusty smell of burning wood.

Many people have a fascination with the natural elements of fire, water, air, and earth. Watching them can have a soothing effect, such as with the regularity of the waves at the beach, the breeze filling the sails of a skiff, or the smell of the rain on parched earth – the petrichor as it is known: a word combining the Greek words for rock 'petros' and 'īchōr' the fluid that flows in the veins of the gods in Greek mythology.

And that is it! There is something about the natural elements that is spiritual. They are part of the basic components of existence, without which we would not be. They bring joy on the one hand but are to be feared on the other.

Last summer we faced one of the worst droughts in recorded history, it was coupled with high temperatures, strong winds, and subsequent bushfires. Our world was alight, and the ubiquitous smoke spread across the countryside to remind everyone that people, property, livestock, and nature itself was under threat.

As a sign of hope, communities in the fire-ravaged areas united and responded to protect and support one another. There were moments of fear, anger, and grief; yet the heroes of the day, the firefighters and other emergency workers, battled on through the summer to control the fires. Relief came with rain in March, which was followed by a slow rebirth that can be seen even now with the greening of the scarred environment.

It is almost a distant memory, but you can still see the effects of the fires when you leave the city and travel through the national parks and forests that were burnt out. We too often easily forget what has been, especially when a new crisis arrives that demands our attention. Enter the coronavirus and yet another reminder of the vulnerability of humanity and the earth we inhabit, and the community has responded.

## Fear and Joy

The deep spiritual moments in our lives are often a mixture of fear and joy. Indeed, they are moments when we are ‘on the edge’ and life may be in the balance – in what is called a liminal experience.

*“... Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”*  
(Luke 2: 10-11)

These middle eastern shepherds would not have been timid souls. They lived rough outdoors in all weather, they protected their sheep from wild animals, they read the seasons and the stars, and trudged over hill and dale in search of food and water for their livestock. The spiritual encounter on the hillside created terror because they thought they were on the threshold of life and death, but from such terror came joy. So, they went to Bethlehem to enter into yet another threshold state in a stable.

## The Great Mystery

During Communion, the Choir will sing a motet titled ‘O magnum mysterium’, which in translation goes:

*O great mystery and wonderful sacrament,  
that beasts should see the new-born Lord lying in a manger.  
Blessed virgin, whose body was worthy to bear the Lord Christ.*

The words come from the office of Matins for Christmas Day and are enigmatic. Of course, it is about the animals in the stable around the crib in which Jesus lay, but that is not as important as what it means. Here we need to seek the message behind the symbol, for it is about the discovery of God being present in humanity, the incarnation no less, there revealed in the self-abasement of poverty and muck. The animals therefore saw and acknowledged the Christ before humanity arrived in the shepherds.

The birth of any child brings with it an element of mystery. We do not create ourselves, but rather life is given to us. It is a gift, just as our community is a gift, just as the natural world is a gift. And so, through the incarnation we come to understand that God comes and offers himself to us as a gift.

But what of the birth? We know that the activities of pregnancy and birth are surrounded by pain, vulnerability, and fear on the one hand; as well as joy, anticipation and hope on the other. It is another liminal experience where two worlds meet, and life is in the balance. It is therefore a spiritual experience through which the elemental and creative purposes of God are found present in humanity and the world is changed.

## **The Liminal Life**

And the world was changed. From that moment in the Bethlehem stable, the world set a new course. In Jesus, a new force was released that changed the world, and the gospels went on to describe it. This Jesus was not so much the ‘gentle, meek and mild’ one of the carols, but rather the bringer of truth who sought to restore the earth and humanity back to a right relationship with God.

Interestingly, Jesus’ most critical commentary was reserved for the religious and political leaders who failed their people because of self-interest, a desire for coercive control, and the abuse of power. Instead, he gave people the opportunity to transcend these human institutional constructs and their failings by finding God in the here and now, and within their own existence.

This is the light that brings truth, freedom, and salvation; a salvation not from damnation and punishment, but for the possibility of bringing peace, and goodness, and justice on earth. We need to recognise it, overcome the great fear, and become part of the movement that seeks to bring new life, or rebirth, with all its vulnerability and mystery.

As Jesus revealed through his life and death, the spiritual journey can be dangerous and ambiguous. Indeed, in such a life we are metaphorically playing with fire as we, like the shepherds and like Mary and Joseph, enter the liminal space between heaven and earth – be it on a Judean hillside, a Bethlehem stable, or on retreat, in prayer and meditation, in reading the Scriptures, or as we gather in worship to encounter God in word and sacrament, as we do tonight.

Do not let the opportunity pass; we seek to transcend those things that make us afraid - the fires, the pandemic, ill health, rejection, betrayal, and powerlessness to name a few. We are encouraged to take on a new life that is engaged with God, with each other, and with the natural world around us. The great mystery in the stable was that the sacred and the worldly met and were brought into communion. May the Communion in which we share tonight likewise lead us back to that mystery of the God who come into the world for the benefit of all people, and even nature where ‘beasts should see the new-born Lord, lying in a manger’.