



Theme: Invited home

**Christmas Eve combined Service
Whitehorse Uniting Cluster 24th December 2021
Plus - Highlights from Christmas Day Services**

Welcome

May this Christmas Worship bless you

Acknowledgement of Country

You are invited to pause and consider all those who have gone before you. Give thanks to God for them. We especially give thanks for the elders past and present of the Wurundjeri people who have cared for the land and waters on which we live and worship. We recognise that they have never ceded sovereignty. We commit ourselves to work towards healing and reconciliation of 1st and 2nd peoples, showing grace and compassion in the journey.

TIS 303 Hark the herald angels sing (2 verses)

Silent Night - Aussie version [AKB]

Carol - Silent Night, Holy Night tMt video

<https://youtu.be/I3lekuoWnJU>

Another version with different words - for tonight

Masks we bring, phones alight
Gospel stories resound in the air
Distanced greetings to show that we care
Christ, the Saviour, is born...

Silent Night, Holy Night
Flocks of sheep, dusty sight
Chirping cicadas herald the babe
Picnic blankets see feasting arrayed
Christ, the Saviour, is born...

Silent Night, Holy Night
Southern Cross shines so bright
Seven sisters lighten the way
As we celebrate Jesus' birthday
Jesus, light of the world!...

Music: FX Gruber, Text: A. Koh-Butler, 2021. Used with Permission

Call to Worship

An unmarried teenage girl was invited— **to carry Christ into this world.**
An ordinary carpenter was invited— **to be a father to a child unlike any other.**
The shepherds were invited— **outcast and isolated, included at the manger.**
The Magi were invited— **foreigners and seekers, included at the manger.**

And if she was invited, and he was invited, and they were invited—

then we can trust that we too are invited.

This story is for us.

This love is for us.

Family of faith, this is our invitation. Welcome home. **Amen.**

Candle Lighting Liturgy

This liturgy is designed for two voices, but it could be adapted for three or four. The simple language and repetition was written with children in mind. We hope you will include them in this sacred ritual.

A: In God's house, there is hope—

For God loves us too much to leave us just as we are. *Light the candle of hope.*

B: In God's house, there is peace—

For all that separates us from God falls away. *Light the candle of peace.*

A: In God's house, there is joy—

Because God created music, and coffee, and dance floors, and laughter that is contagious, and endless rounds of peek-a-boos with babies; and if those things have God's fingerprints, then God's house surely exudes joy.

Light the candle of joy.

B: In God's house, there is love—

Because God is love, from start to finish, and that love exists for us all. *Light the candle of love.*

A: And in the centre of our hope,

B: In the centre of our peace,

A: In the centre of our joy,

B: In the centre of our love, is God—who came to this earth to dwell among us.

A: So tonight, we light the Christ candle, for God's love just could not stay away.

B: Welcome home. Amen.

Carol TIS 312 Once in Royal David's City tMt video

https://youtu.be/rOQ0hso_WOc

Call to Confession

Most Sundays we pray a prayer of confession together. As a kid, I used to think that this was a time to air out all the things I did wrong—all the reasons I was a bad person. However, as I have grown, I have realized—that's not what this is. Instead, this is a small moment for all of us to pause and recognize that we aren't perfect, we are still works in progress, and we want God's help to grow.

How powerful is that? Where else in the world does a group of people gather every week and say out loud: "I'm sorry. I want to grow. Help me get there."

So tonight, as we pray, remember how powerful this is. This is one small way we accept God's invitation to deeper faith and life-changing love. Let us pray together now ...

Prayer of Confession

Holy God,

You throw open the door and invite us into relationship, day in and day out. However, instead of running toward you, we dip our toes in the water of this faith. We hold our breath. We play it safe. We struggle to believe that a love so unfettered, so unfiltered, could be for us. As a result, we often deny this worth for ourselves and others. Forgive us for ignoring your invitation to be the people you call us to be. Forgive us for the ways in which we hold back from deeper connection to you or withhold your radical love from others. Open our ears to not only hear your invitation, but to trust that this good news exists even for us. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Words of Forgiveness

Family of faith,

Even when we fail to trust God's love, and even when we fail to love others as we should, God still loves us.

That door never closes. So hear and believe this good news:

God invites us into a life of faith. God loves us through every season of life. God forgives us when we lose our way and invites us deeper every step of the way. We are loved, invited, claimed, celebrated, and forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

Choir: O Holy night

YouTube version – Celine Dion – O Holy Night (from 1998 These are special times TV Special) 2020

<https://youtu.be/Y1oLk54R5Xg>

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God,

We've heard this story a million times— Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds. We've heard it a million times, but we want to hear it like it's the first. So move among us. Circle back. Draw close.

Crack open our hearts and fill them with your goodness. Help us to hear what it is you might be saying to us with curiosity, joy, and hope. This is an invitation.

Come be here with us. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Readings: Luke 2:1 – 20

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, ^[a] the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, ^[b] praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" ^[c]

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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Sermon: Rev Tina

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.



Difficult Journey – Transition to Bethlehem

Fritz von Unde 1948-1911(From Revised Common Lectionary)

This is a story from my childhood about a lighthouse I once lived on and a community who went the extra mile for my family on Christmas Eve. My family (parents and six children at the time) and our neighbour set out one Christmas Eve on the road the locals still refer to as "corrugated iron" a road that goes from Point Hicks to Cann River. It's a dirt road, most of the way and is about 46.5 kilometres long. We did our shopping for Christmas food and presents, then had lunch at Cann River hotel, where I still remember eating more bush flies than food.

On the way back home, we reached a marshy area and got bogged in the mud. Dad and the neighbour did the usual thing, with branches and rocks under the Land Rover tyres, but, when they tried driving it out, the wheels spun round, and round and mud went everywhere, and the Land Rover became totally bogged. So, Dad climbed up the telephone pole and hooked up an emergency phone and called emergency services in Cann River, who said a Land Rover was on the way.

Mum and Dad and the neighbour sat in the Land Rover having a yarn while us kids sat in the back eating candied popcorn and slapping mosquitos. Several hours later a man and his son turned up in a Land Rover and hooked up a chain to their vehicle and ours and they began reversing their vehicle. The engine for the winch screeched loudly and mud flew everywhere for a good five minutes, and then, silence. They were bogged too. So, the young man climbed up the telephone pole, hooked up the emergency phone and called Emergency services in Cann River. They said a Land Rover is on the way.

So, we made a fire and sat around it and ate and drank some of our Christmas dinner, but not the live turkey, which was making a lot of noise.

Another Land Rover arrived when it was getting dark, and they had a larger winch and chain, and they weren't mucking around. They put the chain around the trunk of a large tree and hooked it up to both vehicles and proceeded to pull our vehicle out of the mud. The engine on the winch screamed as mud flew everywhere, the wheels of their Land Rover spinning around and around and ours, not budging one bit. Unfortunately, they got bogged too.

So, one of the man's sons climbed up the telephone pole and rang emergency services in Cann River and they said: What's going on with you guys? This time we'll send a heavy-duty truck, used to help semi-trailers. So, we waited and waited. My little brothers and sisters went to sleep in the back of the Land Rover, and we ate and drank some more of the Christmas lunch, but not the turkey. It stayed alive.

The truck, with a seriously large winch, arrived several hours later, along with two more men. They hooked up chains and turned on the winch. As the engine roared and their very large truck reversed – they got bogged too.

So, here we were, ten adults and six children stuck in the middle of nowhere, far from home and time was moving onwards, towards 11:00PM. Everyone sat around the fire eating and drinking more Christmas lunch, wondering - what next! All the people from Cann River had left their families to come out into the bush on Christmas Eve, to help us.

By now word had travelled along the grapevine and we heard a car engine in the distance, heading our way and in no time at all an old Humber appeared, driven out of the bush on a small dirt track. An elderly man got out of it, aged way over 80 years old, and said: *Righto, I'm driving you lot home.*

He took us home first. I have no idea how we fitted in his car. There was a front seat, but the other seats were beaten down petrol drums. I think he took my mother, and the six of us children home first and loaded our presents and the turkey into the boot. We arrived home just before midnight, and when Santa was due to come. Then he returned and brought my father and the neighbour home and then took every single one of the other adults back home, before Christmas morning. Who knows what time he finally got home? Meanwhile, the Land Rovers were left there, bogged in the mud, until after Christmas. This story is about a community looking out for one another and the Australian spirit of going the extra mile for one another.

Compare my story with Jesus' first Christmas. The distance between Nazareth and Bethlehem is 156.7 kilometres and would have taken at least 10 days if the family walked or rode the donkey at around 20kilometres a day through hot deserts. At night it was very cold, it was winter, and it may have been snowing and Jesus' family would have needed shelter because of predators such as leopards, lions and bears and bandits or they may have camped out with other travellers. When they finally arrived at Bethlehem everything was booked out, so they slept in a stable, said to be a cave near an inn or under it.

That first Christmas God risked being uncomfortable and vulnerable for us, by being born as a child. Perhaps we are being invited this Christmas to feel uncomfortable in our hearts, the place where God is at home.

Perhaps God came amongst us because of wars, hatred, unforgiveness, injustices, conflict, fighting, division, unkindness, suffering and darkness, everything that isn't about love, to bring love through Jesus, love that changed the world forever. Perhaps because we have God dwelling in our hearts, we feel uncomfortable when we experience everything that's not about love and our hearts go out to those who suffer and we reach out with love, to our neighbour, whether loved one, friend or stranger. Tonight, we will hear stories of hope about loving our neighbour. I hope these stories inspire you.

Choir: The North Wind

Stories of hope

Trevor Thomas from Forest Hill - The Forest hill Uniting Op Shop

The shop is located in the old, newly refurbished hall at 333A Canterbury Road Forest Hill alongside our church. The role of the shop is to raise funds for donations to charitable organisations in our suburbs, in Australia and to assist small international aid organisations. The shop is run by volunteers from Forest Hill Uniting Church and from East Burwood Uniting Church. In 2019 we raised \$50,000 to help people in dire need of food, water, education and medical aid. Since re-opening after refurbishment on 30 November activity is up by 50% and our objective this year is to give away \$75,000. After 17 working days we have raised \$5300 or an average of \$300 a day. We are open 9.30am to 1.00pm Tuesday to Saturday. It is hard to imagine children in our suburbs disadvantaged and malnourished and unable to go on school excursions, so we support the East Burwood Centre.

One of our lists of charities is INA, International Needs Australia, whose head office is in Rooks Road opposite the Stairway church. Some years ago, we helped them stack a 20-foot shipping container with clothing, medical and education supplies and second-hand computers. Problem was this aid was going to central African rural communities that had no electricity. How would they power the computers? Solution was to not send desktops but to send laptops with new batteries and solar panels to charge them. They could also run small LED lights from the computer battery.

You may have heard of a young man called William Kamkwamba who learned to read at school but his parents could not afford to keep him there, so he had to stay home during school time when he was ten years old. He found some books to read about electricity and became very interested in this after seeing a picture of a wind driven generator. He wanted to build one and he had to marry a fan or propeller turning at 100RPM to a generator turning at 2000 RPM and mount it on a high structure. He used pipes, trees, wiring, a bicycle wheel and other junk he found. When he was 14 he built one that worked, (see picture) or Google, William Kamkwamba.

The policy of the Op Shop is to give every child in need the opportunity to excel, and we need your help. You can donate goods that will fit on a shelf, you can volunteer to work as a sorter and shop assistant, or you can buy something. Ladies blouses \$2.50, dresses \$3, books from \$1, children's clothing, steam locomotives and 100ton dump trucks. How did we fit them in? You will find the trucks and locomotives in the toy shop section.

The Op Shop is about loving one another and helping those in need. Please visit us restarting on 18th January and come once a month to buy something. The children of Africa, Nepal, India, Myanmar and the Philippines need you.



Jill Kidd from Mountview Uniting – Centre 81 - A chat, with coffee and care

“We are missing our cuppa and a chat” was a very frequent comment made, when, during the Covid 19 lockdowns, food was collected at the front door of Centre 81.

When, at last, we could see that it was possible to open Centre 81 again, our very loyal team of receptionists indicated their willingness to return to duties, albeit under strict Covid 19 protocols, and our regular clients were contacted to inform them that they would be again welcome to come inside, to enjoy their coffee and chat, along with great care which is always shown by our receptionists.

Enjoy their coffee they did—what joy and excitement, not only from our clients, who were able to re-kindle friendships, but from our receptionists, who too, had not seen one another during the Pandemic. The well-stocked pantry suddenly became depleted, and very quickly needed replenishing.

We have a client who has had major surgery, including the loss of an eye, due to Cancer, popping in regularly. She has been coming to visit for many years, and because she doesn't read or write good English, and now she has difficulty in seeing clearly, she gets us to write her greeting cards, especially to her family, and her much loved grandson. We have another long-time client, whom we have seen a little the worse for wear on many occasions, and we care for him greatly; we have even been known to drive him and his food parcel to his home. Another lady comes, not for food, but because she is lonely, and loves a coffee, and a chat with others.

Two Centre 81 representatives attended the “Celebrating Resilience Forum” run by the Whitehorse Churches Care organisation and held at the New Hope Baptist Church in October. A referral out of that Forum saw us arrange a bed and a mattress for a young single mum with a toddler, from the Eastern Relief Network. This was delivered, very kindly by a member of our Congregation, to save the expense of delivery. A baby's cot was also given to her, by another of our Church Families.

We also support the ladies from Marrageil Baggarrook, and it is very good to see, that gradually, some of the ladies are making their own way to Centre 81, and enjoy a cuppa and chat, and sometimes a food parcel. All the ladies were given Christmas Hampers.

The need for support at Christmas was very great this year. We prepared thirty-six brimming hampers, thanks to all who so very generously donated, but on the day, we had four people walk in off the street, to ask if we could help, so thirty six quickly turned to forty. The highlight of the day for me was seeing one of our hamper recipients, who saw that our previous young mum with toddler was not managing her hamper. The recipient, with car, offered to drive the hamper to her home, and wait while our young mum walked home, with pusher, and toddler safely tucked inside.

God is at work in our lives, we give Him thanks, and pray that He will sustain us in our outreach, and that we will continue to grow in service to Him.

Bev Brown from Blackburn North Nunawading – Robbie's nativity



Robert O'Brien's Life

The Nativity scene you see was made by a member of the Blackburn Nth/Nunawading congregation. It is about ten years old and starting to look its age but it is very precious to us.

When Robert O'Brien, known as Robbie, moved to Nunawading about 20 years ago he joined our congregation. At that time he was in a push wheelchair and members of the church helped him to attend services. He enjoyed craft classes, social gatherings and drama, arranged for disabled people. The Nativity figures are made of plaster of Paris and at that time Robbie had only some use of both hands, so it was made with difficulty. It has only two Wise Men however, and when asked why, Robbie replied that he did not have time to make a third!

Robbie was born in Ararat in 1944. His mother died when he was 2 years of age, and his grandmother took her place while his father worked their farm. When 3 he was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy. The term at that time was "Spastic." Palsy affects the muscles and motor skills, often including the ability to speak clearly. At the age of 4 Robbie was placed into care and he was educated at Yooralla in Carlton. His grandmother died when he was 9 years of age.

At 13 his State Sponsored Schooling and Housing ceased and there followed many, many changes in accommodation and levels of assistance, including some years in an Old People's Home! He was able to earn a small living in his teens and twenties. Robbie married after many years of fighting the 'system' to be allowed to do so but, unfortunately, his wife, Jeanie, died three years later. To relieve his depression, he wrote a book about his life. Robbie had always enjoyed writing (typing) about his exploits, so he obtained a computer and used this proficiently despite having only the use of his right forefinger to type.

Robbie also fought for better access in the city of Melbourne, leading a 'Wheelchair Sit-in' at Flinders Street Station. After many years of waiting, Robbie was provided with an electric wheelchair which he controlled with difficulty, but which gave him independence. Late in 2018 Robbie moved to an Aged Care Home in Foster to join his older sister. He is very happy there, where they can spend time together. (Robbie may be watching this Service this evening).

Robbie's difficult but successful life gives hope to us all. He has come home to family, and he is content.

Robbie's book is available online for about \$5.00. It is named "A Boot Full of Piss". Something that happens when you have a catheter into your bladder that runs to a bag positioned on your leg and a carer leaves its tap open!

Chris and Kina Manuofetoa from Blackburn North Nunawading

Chris: baby Jesus gives us all hope. He gives us hope that for Christmas, we can enjoy the small blessings of celebrating together with our families after a year of being apart.

Li'ekina: the baby Jesus teaches me to forgive people.

Song: A home for all (to Hark the Herald Angels sing)

Carol – Hark the Herald Angels Sing <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IGP68i3JvU>

Call to Offering - Christmas Bowl offering

Jesus was not born in a real home. He was born into poverty.

He was born into simplicity. He was born into a manger in Bethlehem.

And despite the little he might have had; Jesus still spent the rest of his days on earth giving to others. Generosity is in the DNA of our faith. We give what we can, not because we should or because scripture says to. We give because we're family. We give because we belong to one another. We give because all are invited into God's house.

So let us give our tithes and our offerings now.

Prayer of Dedication

Gracious God, your story is one that forever invites us to be our full selves, to take up space, to go where we feel called, and to allow this community to feel like home.

So, use these gifts to keep building your home here. With gratitude as tall as the ceiling, we pray. Amen.

Prayers of the People – Margot Kemke

We come together at this Christmas Season to pray for all the people of our world. A world of uncertainty and fear, a world of self-interest and lack of consideration for others, a world of increasing consumerism and self-gratification and a world which is losing sight of the wonderful Spirit of Christmas.

As we celebrate this Advent season when we rejoice in the wonder of God's gift of his Son to us, may we pray for others - our neighbours, friends and families - with a willingness to be more concerned for them, their concerns, their needs and their well-being, than we are for our own.

Hear our prayers of sincere love and faith.

O Lord, we do not know of the extent of the present pandemic, or the devastation being caused in many countries due to climate change or what will happen in the future, but we pray for healing for the sick and suffering, we pray for the hungry and homeless and especially for those who feel they have no future, no hope. We pray for those who are caring for sick and elderly people who have no one else.

Hear our prayers of sincere love and faith.

We pray for our leaders, federal and state. It is not always recognized that their needs are greater as their responsibilities and official duties increase, and they need to be supported by our prayers for wisdom, compassion and integrity in all their decisions. We pray for our Spiritual leaders as they prepare our worship services, offer us all compassion and understanding and reflect Your love and care for us throughout the year.

Hear our prayers of sincere love and faith.

We pray for all members of our congregations - that we will reflect God's grace and love, his great gift to us and to all around us, this Christmas time and into a New Year which we pray will be full of hope and the promise of a brighter future.

We thank you for the birth of your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given us peace and love and will hold us in the palms of his hands forever.

Grant us hope – peace – love – joy. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
 Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
 For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

Holy Communion

The Spirit of the Lord be with you
And also with you
 Lift up your hearts
We lift them to the Lord
 Let us give thanks to the Lord
It is right to give our thanks and praise

Holy, Holy, Holy God
Our life, our mercy, our might
Heaven and Earth are full of your Glory
Save us, we pray, you beyond all
Blessed is the one who comes in your name
Save us we pray, you beyond all

And so we cry, Mercy:

Mercy!

And so we cry, Glory:

Glory!

And so we cry, Blessing!

Blessing!

And so we cry, Come, Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Spirit!

And so the church shouts, Come, Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Spirit!

And so the earth pleads, Come, Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Spirit!

And so we cry, Amen

Amen!

Life-giver, pain-bearer, love maker. Source of all life that is and shall be.

Father and mother of us all. Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!

The way of your justice be followed by all peoples of the world!

Your heavenly will be done

By all created beings!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom

Sustain our hope and come on earth!

With the bread we need for today, **Feed us**

In the hurts we absorb from one another, **Forgive us**

In times of temptation and test, **Strengthen us**

From trials too great to endure, **Spare us**

From the grip of all that is evil, **Free us**

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever, **Amen**

Christ is the bread of Promise - **for whom the Prophets hoped**

Christ is the cup of Peace - **the Justice of God**

Let us receive what we are. Let us become what we receive

The body of Christ

Invitation

This is the table of the Lord

It is an open table

Where all are welcome

These are the Gifts of God

for all the People of God

May we who Share these gifts

Be found in Christ

And Christ in us

Prayer after Communion

Blessed be God who calls us together

Praise to God who makes us one people

Blessed be God who has forgiven our sin

Praise to God who gives hope and freedom

Blessed be God whose word is proclaimed

Praise to God who is revealed as lover

Blessed be God who alone has called us
Therefore, we offer all that we are and all that we shall become
 Accept, O God, our sacrifice of praise
Amen. Accept our thanks for all that we are.
Our hands were empty and you filled them

Song: TIS 288 Not the powerful, not the privileged

Benediction

As you leave this service, your service begins:
 Comfort the homesick. Open your doors to others. Seek sanctuary.
 Be brave enough to go home by another way.
 And remember that here in God's house, all are welcomed—so come back soon.
 In the name of our Foundation—God, Spirit, and Son—go in peace.

Highlights from the Christmas Day Services



Carol – The First Nowell <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvAJqK9a6Bw>

Call to Worship

Glory to God in the highest heaven
On earth peace be to all people whom God loves
 Let us treasure the words of the gospel
And ponder on them in our hearts
 Let us glorify and praise God
And make known what we know of Jesus Christ born amongst us today

Prayers

Lord Our God a great light dawns and we rejoice in you
 Through you Lord the loving kindness of our saviour appeared
Your grace appeared bringing salvation to all
Glory to God in the highest heaven

Jesus our Lord, Our saviour who brings us peace on earth, joy in our hearts
You made God's love known to us
Your grace appeared bringing salvation to all Glory to God in the highest heaven

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our saviour appeared we were saved through the water of rebirth
 and renewal by the Holy Spirit

The spirit was poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our savior

Come spirit come upon us today, bring renewal of hope and peace of heart
Open our minds afresh to the Christmas message



Christmas Day Sermon - Rev Tina

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen

But Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19 NRSV

There's always something from the Christmas message that we treasure and ponder about in our hearts. For me, after a difficult year of lockdowns it's the memory of the children's faces and posture at the nativity story last Sunday. I showed the children from Grace Church Community and George's children an icon of Mary with her hands stretched out and palms opened upwards as if she is receiving blessings from God or perhaps, she is being open to God's will for him, or both. I invited everyone to place their hands on their knees, palms turned upwards like Mary and to pray to God and close their eyes if they felt comfortable.

Immediately the children placed their hands on their lap with palms turned upwards and closed their eyes. Their faces relaxed and looked filled with light and peaceful, and everything became quiet and timeless. It was a holy moment for all, where we felt close to God as the children prayed silently.

All the words in the world couldn't achieve this openness and love for God. It was God's doing and their response to an invitation to be still before God. I hope they will treasure this moment and ponder on this experience in their hearts.

The shepherds were humble and simple childlike people who were blessed with an encounter with angels. They were God's messengers and what a message, the good news of the birth of the messiah their saviour. Generations had listened to prophecies of Jesus' coming and waited with faith and patience. Of course they wanted to find him and see him. Perhaps they had to search throughout all of Bethlehem and look in all the stables until they found Mary, Joseph and Jesus, just as the angels described him. Imagine their excitement as they told Mary about their encounter with the angels and of the angel's message about Jesus identity.

Mary listened to this message and treasured the words of the angels and pondered on them in her heart. How amazing for Mary from small village to Bethlehem and giving birth to Jesus, to be told he's the long-awaited messiah.

Here we are thousands of years later witnessing the birth and hearing those words about God choosing to be born amongst us and become like us - human, yet divine. This mystery has been treasured and pondered on in many hearts throughout the generations. When I looked at the children praying it helped me visualise what Mary's face must have looked like when she looked at her child's face - at Jesus' face. She must have sensed his presence and the spirit must have opened her heart to God at that moment, just like in the icon.

I remember giving birth to my daughter and looking into her eyes for the first time and bonding with her as mother and child. Imagine what it was like for Mary to bond with Jesus after carrying him in her womb and giving birth to him. That's the invitation of prayer. To bond with God, where we become like one with God, where God is like a midwife birthing holiness in us, just like I saw on the faces of the children as they prayed during the nativity story.

So hush, become still for a moment and place your hands on your lap, palms upwards and close your eyes if you feel comfortable and receive God's love for you and come to know that deep sense of holiness and peace, that only God can offer us. Amen

Christmas Day Sermon Pete Rivett.

Luke 2:21- 40

21After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. 22When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), 24and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." 25Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 29" Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 30for my eyes have seen your salvation, 31which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." 33And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed— and a sword will pierce your own soul too." 36There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. 39When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Amy-Jill Levine; Marc Zvi Brettler. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (p. 114). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

How did we get here? The birth of the Messiah, the breaking in of the Kingdom of God.

If we read our texts and embed ourselves in the story of God, we see a consistent pattern. Chaos to Order, unsustainable life to sustainable life, eternal death to eternal life. I am starting to use the phrase sustainable life in place of eternal life because I feel that Eternal life has become so much part of the furniture. Eternal life is used as a reward you get after you are dead, and the church has used it to coerce power and behaviour in the past. God provides sustainable life, where everyone gets as much as they need, ensuring that everyone else gets as much as they need. When one party takes more than they need, someone down the line starves. This could be food or money but can also be power and privilege. God calls us to sustain life, anything else results in death.

We see sustainable life in the genesis song - out of chaos God creates order. Out of unsustainable life as slaves in Egypt, God creates the Exodus and sustainable life in the promised land. Out of Israel's unsustainable self-righteousness, God inspires prophets to speak uncomfortable truths until Israel again returns to sustainable, faithful life.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Rome had descended on the people of God and had corrupted their sustainable, God-led life with unsustainable living filled with fear of violence, loss of identity, selfishness, greed, and image-conscious living (think flowing robes, glowing armour made to look like big muscles and riding in large chariots). Can we see echoes of Rome in our society today? It is into that context that God dares to do a new thing.

When God creates a new thing, it is always about re-creating sustainable life -or eternal life. Rome had corrupted the promised land through violent coercion, self-centred pre-occupation, obsession with an economy that served the already wealthy, and the retraction of communal life. Under Rome's unsustainable life, serving the man-made kingdom is what kept you from being killed, but you had to forfeit sustainable living.

When God calls us to sustainable living, it is a call to take only our *daily* bread, enough bread for today so that all have enough. Quite different to the way Rome treats bread, Rome first feeds its wealthy and powerful, then it feeds its army and then if there is any bread left the hungry can eat. The gospels, tell us that Jesus operated differently to Rome. If we are committed to following Jesus then we are called to do likewise – living in the spirit of God to create a new thing, a sustainable life. When Rome leaves the people hungry, Jesus feeds them. When the lepers are cast

aside, Jesus heals them. When the powerful argue about money or the righteous about following narrow religious rules, Jesus speaks powerful truth to them demanding that all are restored to their rightful place in life regardless of economic value even if that means the powerful must give up power, or the wealthy give up wealth.

God is always doing a new thing. God did it then, God is doing it now.

Our Christmas readings show a God who does new things through the radical courage of Elisabeth, an older, barren woman whose faithfulness to God spoke a deep truth within her before she carried John the Baptist.

This same God does new things through the teenager Mary. Unexpectedly pregnant outside of religious laws, with expectations of being quietly put aside by Joseph. Her name in Greek means "Rebels against Chaos". God was already doing a new thing through Mary before she carried Jesus.

God did new things through Joseph. Thrown into chaos, torn between religious righteousness and the radical call of God. When Joseph named Jesus, tradition says that Jesus now is within the household of Joseph. Essentially Joseph has adopted, restored to life, Jesus and by extension, Mary with the rightful, life sustaining action of compassion. Everything that Joseph's first-born son should be, should inherit, should embody, is placed on Jesus when he is named by Joseph. Joseph names a child as his own, when that child needed to be named. But God was already doing a new thing in Joseph before that moment. God was moving as Joseph chose to sustain life beyond social image and religious self-righteousness.

In our reading today there are multiple images for the new thing God is doing.

Jesus' circumcision is ensuring he is identified as being in covenant relationship with God, the giver of Life.

Doves or pigeons that are offered in sacrifice echo the promise made to Noah as the flood subsided. God will never again seek to destroy humanity, in fact God will seek to restore and redeem it. That connection is still playing out here on Christmas day.

Simeon, whose life was spent expecting the realisation of the Messiah, recognises that God is doing a new thing and that new thing is the revelation of sustainable life, redemptive life, to the Gentiles through the life of Jesus.

Anna, female prophet with echoes of Miriam, the sister of Moses, who helped lead God's people through the wilderness, breaks from her fasting and praying to recognise God's new thing in this baby Jesus.

For us on this Christmas day, God is once again offering a new thing, a new sustainable, eternal life for all. Our modern Rome, our culture, our way of life, uses fear language to drive wedges between communities, to leverage that fear into breaking life down to smaller and smaller pieces until the only thing that matters is me, my people and my possessions and my rights. Can we hear God's call to us to transcend our self-centredness, the desire to retreat into ourselves because of anxiety and fear or egoism?

We are called to live deeply into this new thing that God is continually doing. Healing the sick, speaking good news into the broken hearted, eating with the hungry, breaking down stigma and labels until we see the Christ that God is calling us to participate in.

Christ is born this day. **Amen**

Pastoral Care tips – Rev Tina

This Christmas the best thing we can do for one another is to unite and pray for our neighbour, whether loved one, friend or stranger, whether at home or far away or visitor or those we are visiting. It has been a challenging year so lean into God and love one another. Have a happy, safe and peaceful Christmas celebration with your families and friends, of the birth of Jesus Christ and all the blessings we have received from one another.

Be a blessing to others and be happy.

Andrea Bocelli and Celine Dion. The Prayer. Over 152M viewers. 2015 Andrea Bocelli

https://youtu.be/qt_OkgSOrkU

Andrea Bocelli with daughter Virginia – Hallelujah Hollywood Bowl CA 2021 FTW

<https://youtu.be/llocoDTV4vA>

