

Sunday 11 December and Saturday 24 December, 2022

An address given by the Dean of Melbourne at the Service of Lessons and Carols 2022

For many, the story of the coming into the world of the Son of God is something that belongs ‘a long time ago’ and in another realm. But again and again, artists, musicians, poets, liturgists and preachers have made the birth of Christ into something that speaks—urgently, radically, powerfully—to our current world. This year we have commissioned a new Christmas carol. We have sung it at the start of the service. Its evocative poetry, by Katherine Firth, set to music by Christopher Willcocks, invites each of us to enter the story of Christmas—in our imagination and by our transformative action; echoes the Biblical invitation to ‘receive him, to believe on his name’, as John’s great prologue of the Incarnation puts it. Drawing inspiration from artworks that we have displayed here in the Cathedral over the last few years, and from our own advocacy and action here at St Paul’s, each verse of the hymn reflects a particular aspect of the world that the Christ-child comes into, in the hope that we might see his glory, ‘full of grace and truth’, even in the struggles of our world.

The first artwork hangs halfway down the pulpit aisle of the Cathedral. A hundred years ago, soon after the horrors of the First World War, Melbourne artist Violet Teague imagined what it would have been like for Jesus to have been born during the War. Her painting *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, also known as *Anzac Christmas*, pictures Jesus born in a traditional Turkish building on the Gallipoli peninsula. Under a low-vaulted roof, Mary, in a simple blue dress, kneels at the side of her sleeping baby. Two soldiers kneel alongside her. One in deep contemplation, his worn face illumined by the bright warm glow that comes from the Christ-child. ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it’, the great prologue of the Incarnation assures us.

The other soldier looks up. Seemingly lost in thoughts, his face white and eyes wide open, as if recalling the horrors of conflict that surround them. A donkey sniffs at the hay, enjoying that

moment's rest from ferrying supplies or carrying wounded soldiers. Into the mud, violence, and trauma of the First World War, a tiny child brings sunlight and peace, and a chance for healing. 'A long time ago, and here today', our carol speaks of the power of making present the story of Christ's birth right where we are; entering into it ourselves, bringing our own burdens and hopes to the 'tiniest child'. As he nestles in his mother's 'skirts of deep blue sky', the Christ-child calls us to work for peace and reconciliation in our world.

During the Covid-pandemic, our artist in residence and Canon of St Paul's, Uncle Glenn Loughrey, imagined what the Country on which we meet might have looked like before white folks arrived here. His images, *Naarm* and *You Yangs to the Bay*, hang in our transept gallery. Point by point Uncle Glenn captured the grey and ochre of our mountain ranges, the blue-white brilliance of our sky, the grey-green of gums and grasses, the dark dust of the dirt and the lighter brown of the sand. Footprints of animals and humans crisscross the landscape; the traces of where they rested and met are imprinted on Country. Only two animals can be seen: high in the skies, majestic wedge tail eagles soar across the land.

'What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people', St John tells us in our final lesson. In winter this year, Uncle Glenn's images were cast in glass and placed in the narthex screen at the entrance of our Cathedral. In their carol, Katherine Firth and Chris Willcock imagine what it would be like if we looked at the Christ-child through the lens of Uncle Glenn's new glass panels. What it would be like if we saw the deeper history beneath our feet through the semi-opaque iridescence of the glass. We may catch reflections of the presence of the One who made heaven and earth by his Word as we trace the 'starlight opal river in kangaroo grain and weeping grass'. As he comes to us a human, robed in the dust of the earth, we may find the tiniest child right where we are. Lying 'in a hammock laced from reeds, dawn-haloed in ochre, dust and shells', the Christ-child encourages us to make known his truth and make present his justice in our world.

Five years ago, as the Civil War in Syria raged, Archibald-winning artist Ben Quilty brought a special kind of Christmas tree into our Cathedral. Made from hundreds of lifejackets, the tree stood twelve feet tall. Some of the jackets were tiny, the right size for a child, and were covered in small cartoon stickers. They were collected on the beaches of the islands of the Eastern

Aegean, where they'd been left behind by the families who had undertaken the perilous sea journey from Turkey to safety in the European Union. The tree's Christmas lights signalled the morse code for S-O-S. 'Save our souls', the maritime distress call. God came into our world as a tiny, helpless, terrified baby to save our souls. 'From his fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace', John proclaims.

Born in an insecure, temporary shelter, to parents displaced by external political forces, he and his parents were made refugees. Soon after his birth, the tiniest child is rushed from Bethlehem in fear of his life. Today, children still live in similar situations: forced to travel unsafely to internal camps or across borders by climate change, war, oppression and other disasters. Our carol imagines the tiniest child as a vulnerable refugee relying on the open arms of others for welcome and safety, and a chance to rebuild their lives. The tiniest child longs for our welcome. He longs to be sheltered by us, longs to enter our hearts. Laid 'on a pile of seasalt weed, bright glistening with sand and ocean's spray', the Christ-child invites us to have our lives rebuilt, so that we may work with him in transforming our broken and hurting earth.

Each Christmas you and I are invited to make the story of the birth of Jesus our own, by entering ourselves into his story. If you look at the Christmas Crib that our Precentor Heather set up in the sanctuary of our Cathedral, you can see people you know—or even see yourself—as part of the Christmas story. Late last month, our Cathedral alumnus Gavin Hansford—a talented photographer and priest—set up a photographer's studio here. Taking pictures of our congregants and staff, he captured Mary and her baby, Joseph and the shepherds, extraordinary visitors to the manger—old and young wise people and angels, as well as everyday worshippers who have come to see what's going on. All those featuring in our Crib are people who worship with us here. All are people who have already found the tiniest child for themselves, and have chosen to give him a home.

'To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God', John promises. This Christmas, you and I are invited again to open our hearts to the Christ-child, to make him 'safe in the place', and offer him our own gifts of faith and hope, of care and commitment. This Christmas, you and I are called to look for his light amidst the darknesses, wars and traumas of our world, and share his grace and truth right where we are. This Christmas, you

and I are invited to sing the song of the coming of God among us in many voices—in your own voice—so that all may understand it and share with us in discovering the glory of God in the Word made flesh, living right among us, where we are—God the only Son, close to the Father’s heart, making him known to all people.