

*St Brandon's, Sermon for Christmas 1, 29th December 2019.
Isaiah 63:7-9, Hebrews 2:10-end, Matthew 2:13-end.*

Rachel crying

Alison Hobbs

Did you have a happy Christmas? - Are you *having* a happy Christmas? I ask it both ways, to cover those that were itching to take down the Christmas tree on Boxing Day, and those that relish every one of the twelve days of Christmas. Whether you are still in the snug glow of mulled wine and candlelight, or catapulted into the bracing fresh air looking ahead to snowdrops and fresh, new years.

Whichever, it is still a jolt to be dropped from our Christmas bubbles into the mud, so soon. Peace and goodwill to all, is still echoing in our ears as we hear the maddened Herod's edict to slaughter the innocent babes.

A violation of what we've been promised.

Perhaps even a sense of failure – certainly a vulnerability is exposed if Christmas was sold to us as a happy-ever-after-with-tinsel-on, story.

But, I get ahead of myself: I was wondering, Did you have a happy Christmas? - Are you *having* a happy Christmas?

I'm not expecting answers, though I'm happy to hear the tales, good or sad, at the end of the service! Because that's the range of answers I suspect arise across the lot of us, good and sad: Christmas contains more potential for complications emotionally than most times of the year. Whether the faith story is relevant or not, everyone gets that Christmas is primarily about love and hope;

unfortunately, one's *own* capacity to love, and ability to be loved, can seem to be on the scales, if we let it take us there. We see and feel the effect we have on those around us: for better or worse. Who we spend Christmas with - or without - is often not of our choosing. All is not entirely in our control.

We will probably be irritated by something over Christmas, crank the pressures up, and the possibility is we could get infuriated by something or someone – including ourselves. Really tragic personal dramas can erupt with life-long consequences where expectations are un-meetable and relationships fragile. But even on a micro-scale, tears and remorse and little spoilers are difficult to avoid altogether.

This is not because we've got it all wrong, it may not be the best way we could do it all but its a reflection of the package that is called human love: full of the highest ideals and big on pain. Why else would it be both a time of moments of great joy and painful blips? Why else would it matter so much that Jesus came

to us, if it were not that that mix and muddle is our best attempt to understand human loving?

In all of today's readings, for me, the poignant and throat-sticking line is 'Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.' It goes to the heart in every way, the pain of that loss, the pain of the wrong, the pain of the innocence devastated.

Step back, and we see that slaughter framed by an angel visiting Joseph in a dream to warn him to run to safety with the infant Jesus, and he does, he listens to the angel, follows instructions and successfully protects that precious little life.

So what about all the fathers of the other infants living in the area around Bethlehem? Were they not listening? Or did God choose not to mention Herod's plans to them? How do we square that? How can we ever understand the ways of God and man?

How would we have written the story?

How would we have written the story of the life and death of Jesus: and could any **human** version have achieved what God achieved through Jesus?

Can we trust God to be the story-writer of our lives when we see such suffering in the world?

Scripture, and our experiences, show us that God uses the most extraordinary and unlikely material to make his people increasingly aware of him; to draw good out of terrible, painful terrors.

Step further back from the Gospel reading into the Old Testament reading, and we are reminded of all the great and faithful actions of God, the gracious and praiseworthy acts, according to the abundance of his steadfast love: *'his presence saved them, in his love and in his pity he redeemed them.'*

This passage from Isaiah and others like them precede stories of inexplicable disasters that befall the community: those disasters happen despite God's presence and activity.

The pattern every time is that he will be there, redeeming them, in and through those inexplicable disasters, in his love and in his pity. An assurance that we are lifted and carried, and that knowledge alone, can change us.

The Christmas story is the great move by God to come **yet closer**, to come amongst us as man, born as vulnerable as any other baby, in the midst of the brutality of power struggles and poverty. To join us and remain with us through the Holy Spirit.

The Hebrews reading (if you can get into it) reminds us how Jesus knew suffering:

we would never have wanted to write the scenario for our child that God volunteered for his Son!

Jesus's identification with suffering, through into death and out into resurrection is crucial to our ability to be redeemed by God.

In practise, this means that in all the painful mess of bigger and smaller hurts, of national and personal wrong-doings, God is with us, in the person and Spirit of Jesus. Its a grace and choice we make to recognise that in our lives, or not. We choose to be open to the Spirit, and not work as if we are alone.

We have to recognise the difference between what WE do, and what GOD does, and take responsibility for our own actions, and grieve over the actions of others without passing the blame onto God. He has come to save us but in his own way, and that is his gift and entitlement.

When I behave like the selfish child I am, its not God who's to blame but me. But by God's good grace, he is always present, always the choice I could make, if only I could live fully in the light of that knowledge.

I once had a glimpse of the difference God with us makes in a very direct and simple way.

When I was first a mother, I was determined not to lose my temper or get angry with my children: you laugh! But I longed to be able to purely love them and treat them with all the respect and patience their intelligence and lack of experience entitled. Of course, it proved impossible!

But I clearly remember the bizarre experience of being furious with a small toddler, opening my mouth to hurl cruel and vengeful things only to find the sentences I started were able to be changed in my mouth to measured and positive expressions.

I was pretty surprised with what I came out with.

I wondered at the transformation of my words when the heat of my intent was still in me. I could only think that it linked with the heartfelt appeal I had made to Jesus moments before the incident to help me stay loving.

Over the years, I've forgotten the words involved but I remember the incident, one of those keystones in my faith development: the Spirit's ability to transform me was treasured in my heart, as Mary treasured the angels' promises.

Human love is limited so divine love came down at Christmas to dwell with us and in us; to be the light that the darkness cannot overcome.

The promise is that one day, darkness and evil will be no more but we are not at that stage of the story yet, we are living in the time of assurance that it will not be the last word, evil has not and will not be the winner.

But its God's story, and its not possible for us to understand the complexity of it from where we are standing.

We can only hold to the promise that we are given *God With Us*, whether we are living in Rachel's agony of lamentation, or in the bubble that most of us are fortunate to live in, most of the time.

We can only hold to God's promise and respond with open hearts, willing our ways to turn to peace and goodwill to all people.

Amen