

The taste of tradition

There always the temptation to sugar coat Christmas...but not us, not this year. We are too aware of the precarious State we are in – how everything can change in an hour. We are too aware of the gift of good government and caring people that are managing this emergency in a sane and organised way.

Saddened by continued separation – we are aware that over 3000 people are dying every day in the USA and the UK's National Health Service is overwhelmed.

Before we add Trump, trade wars, Kremlin cyber-attacks – we know our brothers and sisters in Fiji are cleaning up invisibly after cyclone Yasa... so no, this is not a sugar-coated Christmas. No matter what we say and do – the stores can't sell us jolly.

We are grateful for our families and this community. We are grateful for responsible adults keeping their distance, sanitising their hands. I am humbled that this congregation followed me through this Advent on a serious journey into our souls.

And we are deeply grateful for Christmas. We made it. Hope is born.
Stripped of all the finery depicted in medieval prints
Back to the manger and two ordinary people
And some outcasts
Hope is born.

I have chosen these two readings as they contrast each other. Luke focusses on the politics – why they have travelled; who made them refugees and the role of the lowly shepherds in carrying the word. Right from the beginning, God chooses the unlikely to bring his message. Here we have shepherds; in another story the 'wise men (later to become kings) kings' were, by the way, originally astronomers which explains why they were jointly interested in the star.

(And I digress – did you know that 'the star' is happening again right now in our heavens? The alignments of planets combine and make a bright space in the sky. The first time since Galileo)

But back to unexpected broadcasters – Shepherd, as outcasts, tell the tale of the baby born. The first Christian convert was a black transgender person; the

women who stayed with Jesus carried the news of his rising; Saul/Paul the Christian-hater becomes the foundation of the church, you get the picture... God of unexpected places. Unlikely messengers – always.

In Luke's gospel – the Shepherds tell Mary what they saw and heard and she "treasured these things and pondered them in her heart". Luke's gospel is very grounded in the place, the time and the personal experience. A contemplative and quiet response. Savoured. Luke allows us to witness.

John's gospel is much more heavenly focussed. It is the fulfilling of God's plan. It doesn't look at how people perceived the child but instead certifies his divine nature and the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies. It emphasises John's (The Baptist) humanness and Christ's godliness. John, the writer, pretty well sets in stone, right from the beginning – this is God made flesh.

The contrasts of the Bible stories tell us about the writers' theology as much as their times. Each Gospel is shaped by the intervening events. Each one has an important focus for the context and the time. Just as the Christmas stories and traditions have been layered over time. Each layer and experience changes us too. Just as this Christmas is flavoured by the passing year.

There is a local context for every tradition.

My grandparents were Russian. You know how hard and isolated a Russian winter can be. The tradition passed down in our family was raisins and almonds. We had Christmas stockings that were indeed my father's socks. The toe of the sock would always hold an orange. An improbable and impossible fruit from far, far away. The stocking would have nuts and raisins as the sweets with perhaps a single boiled lolly or candy cane. An orange in the middle of winter was truly a wonderful thing.

Popcorn to feed the squirrels in midwinter was an act of kindness reflecting the pilgrims being fed. Popcorn being a traditional native American food.

Carolling was originally a legitimate way for the poor to beg door to door from landowners.

Each of our families and contexts will become part of our Christmas stories. No amount of commercialisation should be allowed to erase the memories and traditions that we stand upon.

So thank you COVID for dampening our exposure to sugar-coated Christmas and allowing us, like Mary, to treasure, and ponder, and sing the glory to God. May we be improbable broadcasters.

And let us treasure our experiences
The joy and hardships
That will shape our Christmases to come.

I'd like to read the poem again – so it may sit in our thoughts.

Amen

It's up to you

This year some went crazy with lights
But most did not.
A pall of restraint has fallen
Like snow across our separated communities.
Uncertainty
Reigns like the black velvet sky behind the stars.

And in the stillness
A babe is born,
Kernel of hope,
Bringer of peace,
Formed from pure love.

The true meaning of Christmas
Shines through the night.
Rises above the news and advertisements.
Hold tight those you love;
Forgive;
And make room for new beginning.

For I have arrived
Vulnerable
A small spark in
In the dark
Only you can fan the flame.

J Shannon Xmas 2020